BANTAM CLASSIC

Ten Plays by Euripides

Translated by Moses Hadas and John McLean
With an Introduction by Moses Hadas

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INTRODUCTION

Moses Hadas

1

EURIPIDES (approximately 485–406 B.C.) was the youngest of the great triad of Greek tragic poets; but so rapid was the efflorescence of tragedy that he was adult when Aeschylus was producing his greatest plays, and was himself survived by the nonagenarian Sophocles. Because the three were so close in time, because Greek literary art like Greek architecture tended to preserve forms once perfected, and most of all because the religious origins and associations of tragedy dictated at least formal adherence to traditional usages, there is a superficial sameness about the productions of all three. Their themes are drawn from the same body of myth, their dramatis personae are often identical, their stage conventions of actors and chorus, costume and scenery, are the same, and there is the same pattern of *episodes* of dialogue in iambic meter separated from one another by elaborate choral *stasima* in lyric meters. A near-sighted reader leafing through a volume of collected plays could not quickly identify their authors.

But the superficial similarities make the essential differences the more striking. Aeschylus and Sophocles have the remoteness as well as the grandeur of the classic; what they have to tell us is profound and momentous, but it belongs in an abstract realm not immediately relevant to ordinary experience. And in keeping with this remoteness their language too, in its stateliness as well as its lyricism, is at a far remove from the usual speech of ordinary men. Euripides, by contrast, is nearer our own end of the spectrum; once we acclimate ourselves to the special conventions which his theater demanded we

can recognize that his premises and objectives and even his modes of expression are nearer our own world than are the Elizabethans. In his program and outlooks he is actually quite close to Ibsen and Shaw.

Even in his life and career Euripides stands apart from his environment. Aeschylus had been a soldier; the epitaph which he wrote for himself boasts of his prowess against the long-haired Persians and says nothing of his poetry. Sophocles held important public offices and was celebrated for his social gifts. Euripides seems to have remained isolated from his community. He is represented to us as a brooding and bookish recluse, born of a mother who peddled vegetables, unfortunate in two marriages, a misogynist, a misfit who moved to barbarian Macedonia at the end of his life and who was eventually torn to pieces by Molossian hounds for his general subversiveness.

That he was brooding and bookish is quite likely, and he may even have isolated himself in an underground library as he is alleged to have done. His unpopularity is indicated by his lack of success in the tragic competitions. Where Sophocles won many prizes Euripides is credited with only four, and some of these may have been for posthumous revivals. Even a masterpiece like the *Medea* took only a third. He was denigrated by the comic poets; several of Aristophanes' plays contain uncomplimentary allusions to Euripides' life and works and he is the principal butt of the *Frogs* and the *Thesmophoriazusae*. The removal to Macedonia is indeed an indication of discomfort in Athens; it is inconceivable that a Sophocles would take such a step.

But the gossip concerning his domestic life is clearly the product of calumny and is in part proven to be such by fragments of the third-century B.C. biography of Satyrus, recovered from papyri. The alleged misogyny, as anyone who reads the plays can see, is the reverse of the truth. In his sympathy for all the victims of society, including womankind, Euripides is unique not only among the tragic poets but among all the writers of Athens. If Euripides did not participate in the public life

of Athens he was at least aware, on the evidence of his plays, not only of the intellectual but also of the political currents of his time. The *Andromache,* written early in the Peloponnesian War, shows a loathing of Spartan arrogance and cruelty and deviousness. *The Trojan Women*, presented while the Syracusan expedition was in preparation and Athenian claims to moral superiority had been proven hollow, shows his utter disillusionment. The retributive death is a palpable fiction. Actually when news of Euripides' death reached Athens, Sophocles dressed his chorus in mourning to pay homage to his insufficiently appreciated rival.

Fuller vindication came in the generations following. His plays continued to be applauded when those of Aeschylus and Sophocles had come to seem remote and irrelevant. It is no accident that whereas only seven each of the plays of these two have come down to us we have eighteen of Euripides', or if we count the doubtful *Rhesus,* nineteen. More important than the ampler survival of his own work is the fact that he, not Aristophanes, is the ancestor of New Comedy and hence of the main stream of European drama.

2

What makes it possible for us to regard Euripides as the ancestor of New Comedy, what makes his theater more accessible to us than Aeschylus' or Sophocles', is his descent from the heroic ideal to what may by contrast fairly be called the bourgeois. Dante justified calling his serious poem a comedy, in a letter to Can Grande della Scala, on the grounds that it moved from darkness to light and that, written in the vernacular, it was accessible even to the kind of people who congregate at the town pump. On these grounds many of Euripides' plays may similarly be called comedies. His language too approaches the colloquial; his plays tend to move from darkness to light. But most important, his personages do not invite tragedy in order to illustrate the operation of some grand ethical abstraction and to achieve heroism; theirs is the humbler aim of surviving as tolerably as may be

amid conventional constraints which make tolerable existence difficult—not to die gloriously but to live happy ever after.

For achieving his end Euripides' regular strategy is a very simple one: retaining the old stories and the great names, as his theater required, he imagines his people as contemporaries subjected to contemporary kinds of pressures, and examines their motivations, conduct, and fate in the light of contemporary problems, usages and ideals. An incidental product of this approach is a critical deflation of the heroic outlook by something like a parody of the personages who are its vehicles. In the *Iphigenia at Aulis*, for example, Agamemnon and Menelaus are plainly pompous, ambitious, ineffectual politicians, Achilles a braggart soldier, Clytemnestra a middle class matron. The true heroine, whose selfless virtue makes the rest of the cast look tarnished and vulgar, is the simple Iphigenia.

But the main object of the new approach is to criticize the antiquated conventions of a constricting social order which hamper and oppress contemporary life. Plays like *Alcestis, Medea, Hippolytus* justify themselves amply as drama; but they acquire a new dimension of meaning if the reader is aware that in each the victim suffers from, and by implication criticizes, disabilities enjoined by current Athenian usages. The laws under which the audiences of these plays lived and which they presumably accepted without question denied basic human rights to women and foreigners and bastards, and the plays show the tragic consequences of this denial.

It is Euripides' *Electra* which affords our best illustration of the process and effects of subjecting a traditional myth to examination by contemporary rather than heroic norms, because in this one instance we have parallel versions of the story in the *Electra* of Sophocles and the *Choephoroe* of Aeschylus with which to compare it. The simple directness of Euripides' language and the relative realism of his action is an implicit criticism of the idealization of his predecessors, and the criticism becomes overt in the parody of Aeschylus' implausible recognition scene. But Euripides' object is not merely to offer a more realistic version of the well-worn myth. The great names are only a masquerade: what Euripides wishes to show is how the

heroic deeds of legend look when carried out by contemporaries, what the people involved in such a story must be like, what the relevance of the story may be in terms of ordinary attitudes and behavior.

A startling innovation in decor announces these intentions at once. Instead of the customary temple or palace facade which tragedy regularly employed for its backdrop, we are shown a ramshackle hovel; and the first speaker is a tattered peasant. Electra is a self-pitying slattern obsessed with sex: it is a new thing for tragedy to be concerned with lack of proper cosmetics and a party dress. Orestes is a timorous young ruffian who acts and talks like the vagabond he is and who has come skulking into Argos by a back way. Clytemnestra is a well-meaning but wholly unimaginative suburban housewife. Aegisthus seems a decent sort whom it is hard to imagine as a villain or even a sinner. The murders are stripped of any heroic dignity and are merely sickening. Aegisthus is hewn down from behind while stooping for a religious ritual, by a man he had courteously invited to share in the ceremony and whom he had supplied with the cleaver. Clytemnestra is lured to her death by mother love: Electra had pretended she required her assistance with a newborn baby.

In the older versions the murders are softened by stylization and theology; they are part of the working out of a universal moral scheme and had been enjoined by irresistible divine authority. For Euripides the matricide is a completely unmitigated evil, and even the less heinous murder of Aegisthus is inexcusable, for the Argives are quite reconciled to the *coup d'état* which brought him to the throne and willing to let sleeping dogs lie. But Orestes is not so much a villain as a pitiful victim of a code long antiquated and now meaningless. To put the blame on Apollo is to make of him a monster too horrible to contemplate, and many critics have thought that it was part of Euripides' purpose to discredit belief in Apollo. Apollo does exist and his power cannot be questioned, but it is not a beneficent power and it is not responsible for the kinds of conduct for which men assume its authority. What Euripides discredits is

not belief in the gods but the kind of belief which promotes such horrors as the *Electra* exhibits.

Other of Euripides' plays, and particularly those in which the Argive royal household—Agamemnon and Menelaus, Clytemnestra and Helen, Electra and Orestes—are involved, employ the technique which the *Electra* illustrates. What gives the family its distinction is of course the central role it played in the Trojan war, and at every possible turn Euripides underscores the monumental folly of that war. The most outspoken criticism of the war and of its frivolous cause is the *Trojan Women*. Here we see not only the utter ruin with which war afflicts the vanquished, but the utter demoralization which it visits upon the victors. When both have been demonstrated to the full we are shown the cause: in the midst of the scarred victims blackened by the smoke of their burned city and of the frightened victors there steps forth a bedizened and sensuous and indifferent Helen.

3

Because of his social criticism Euripides has been called a liberal and because of his attitude to the gods a rationalist. If by rationalist we mean disbeliever the term cannot apply to Euripides. In plays like *Hippolytus* or *Bacchants* the gods may be cruel and vindictive but they surely exist and they surely possess terrifying power. Nor is liberal the right label unless by liberal we mean one who is generally opposed to injustice and suffering. Actually Euripides' views on religion and society alike are expressions of a consistent philosophic outlook which the teachers called sophists maintained and promulgated and which brought upon them the hostility of such conservatives as Aristophanes and Plato.

The principle at issue rests upon a distinction drawn between *physis* ("nature") and *nomos* ("law" or "convention"). Those aspects of the world and society which are such by *nature* cannot be altered; man can only accommodate himself to them and make the best of them. But those aspects which are

the product of *convention* were created by man for expediency's sake; when they are no longer expedient they not only may but should be altered. The gods belong to the same category as gravity or the weather; to attempt to explain their impingements upon the life of man is futile, for they operate by no human rationale. All that man can do is to be aware of the possibility of their impingement and take whatever precautionary measures are feasible. Even when he has done his best he may still be tripped up by forces beyond his control or calculation—and then we have tragedy.

But man himself needlessly adds to the tragic burden by treating aspects of his life which are in fact determined by convention as if they were determined by nature. Once upon a time the social code of the heroic age was useful and appropriate; to be controlled by it when it is no longer so results in such distortions of human values as we see in the *Electra*. Is the different value attached to man and woman, to Greek and barbarian, to freeman and slave, to the legitimate and the bastard, due to a difference in *physis* or in *nomos*? If it is due to a difference in physis then such tragedies as those of Alcestis and Medea, of Andromache and Hippolytus, are inevitable; but if these wrenchings of humanity are due only to convention they might have been avoided.

For the proper appreciation of these plays it is important to realize that the conduct which they suggest may be reprehensible is the conduct which their audiences accepted as the correct norm. Admetus is not only a decent but an admirable man by conventional standards, as his punctilious insistence on entertaining Heracles shows. If his willingness to let his wife die for him seems to us monstrous, it would not have seemed so to his predominantly masculine Athenian audience. But a thoughtful spectator could hardly leave the theater without having his mind opened to the possibility that the assumption of masculine superiority is based mainly on smugness. The children of an alien mother were not, in Athenian law, entitled to privileges of citizenship; hence, Jason's repudiation of his barbarian wife and marriage with a Greek princess to ensure the future of Medea's children would seem correct and prudent behavior. It seems less

so when Jason puts the masculine and Athenian justification of his behavior into words. He owes Medea no gratitude, he says, because women always must serve men. Moreover he gave more than he received because he brought Medea from lawless barbary to the superior atmosphere of law-abiding Greece. Only a very stupid audience could miss the irony. Medea's horrible murders are not condoned; but she would never have been driven to commit them if her rights as a human being had been recognized in the first place. Hippolytus, except for his abnormal loathing for love, is an admirable young man. He loathes love because that was the power which made him a bastard. If convention had not put bastards (who are in nature not different from other men) under disabilities, Hippolytus' mind need never have been twisted, and the tragedy need never have happened.

And so it is with other plays also. Tragedy is implicit in the nature of man as the sparks fly upward, but there is no reason why man should compound the sorrow by regarding his own conventions as laws of nature.

4

Nor is Euripides properly speaking a realist, though as compared with his predecessors he goes farther along the path towards realism than towards rationalism. Not only are the heroic figures of legend reduced to ordinary humanity plagued by the ills of contemporary society and sometimes dressed in tatters, but peasants and servants and even children appear on his stage. Yet his plays are not transcripts of life but artistic distillations in highly conventionalized forms. Verse was mandatory for all ancient drama, even for the more relaxed New Comedy of the next century and even for the Roman adaptations of it in the centuries following. Euripides accepts the convention not only of verse but of the equally artificial line-for-line dialogue (*stichomythia*) and formal long speeches (*rhesis*). But for his dramatis personae and their problems the richly embroidered grandeur of Aeschylus would be ludicrous, and Euripides' vo-

cabulary and syntax as well as his imagery are virtually colloquial. He is the first Greek classic the student learns to read with confidence; Aeschylus is as difficult as Shakespeare is for a foreigner learning English.

But it is only the dialogue which is simple and straightforward; the choral portions use all the resources of lyric and their music and choreography appear to have required highly trained performers. Because of their different mode, Euripides' choral odes are more sharply set off from their contexts than his predecessors' and tend to become interludes to fill the intervals between acts. Sometimes their connection with the body of the play is tenuous and forced. In the *Electra*, for example, an elaborate description of the arms of Achilles is justified on the ground that it is wicked to murder a general who had a soldier so handsomely equipped in his army. In plays involving familiar characters and intrigue the chorus is indeed an awkward anachronism. It is hard to imagine fifteen women standing by while a mother murders her children. Frequently the chorus is begged to abet some deed of horror by keeping silent—which only underscores the implausibility. Once Euripides shows his irritation at the incubus: when the chorus of the *Orestes* explain that they have come to inquire after Orestes' health, they are told to go elsewhere to sing and dance and not disturb the invalid.

But Euripides makes skilful use of the incubus for providing a particular social background for characterization and action, and for receiving lessons on behalf of the community at large. Most plausible and most serviceable are the choruses of ordinary women attached to a heroine who report gossip they have overheard while washing clothes (as in *Medea*), or accompany their mistress on a pilgrimage and enjoy and describe the sights (as in *Ion*), or share their mistress' exile and nostalgia (as in *Iphigenia Among the Taurians*), or show their sympathy for a member of their sex in deep misfortune (as in *Andromache*). But even these typically "choric" functions tend to be transferred to the more economical Nurse and confidante, of whom Euripides makes such excellent use. The chorus whose odes are at once the most beautiful and the most essential to the play is

that of the devotees of Dionysus in the *Bacchant*. Perhaps it was because this play was composed in Macedonia, where virtuosi choristers were not available, that Euripides here reverted to older modes.

5

The personages and the main outline of Euripides' plays were doubtless familiar to his audiences, for like his predecessors' they were for the most part concerned with

Presenting Thebes' or Pelops' line,
Or the tale of Troy divine.

But in the process of giving them greater contemporary relevance and interest, Euripides introduced and often mortised into the old stories intrigues involving love-stories, recognitions, adventurous travels, hair-breadth escapes, mostly drawn from folk motifs. To follow the novel and more complicated plots the audience would need to be apprised of locale, antecedent factors, and direction; this information Euripides supplies in his so-called "prologues." Actually all plays have prologues, for the term is properly defined as "that portion of a tragedy which precedes the entry of the chorus." What is peculiar to Euripides is his opening with a lengthy monologue which sets the stage for the action. Sometimes the monologue is delivered by a minor character, as in the brilliant example of *Medea*; sometimes it is "protatic," which is to say, delivered by a personage, frequently a deity, who has no direct part in the play.

More significant than Euripides' mode of opening a play is his characteristic mode of concluding it. Frequently a god appears "out of the machine" (a kind of crane which hoisted the actor representing the god to a point above the level and frequently out of the sight of the other actors), solves the complications left by the preceding action and supplies a happy

ending. It was once the fashion to condemn this practice, for only a botcher could get his plot so involved as to require so illogical a solution.

But the botching was surely intentional, and meant to be disbelieved by at least the intelligent part of the audience. In almost every case where some deity imposes a happy ending, the normal consequences of the action would be disaster. In *Iphigenia Among the Taurians* we are told that Thoas' troops control the narrow passage through which Orestes' boat must pass, and that a strong wind is blowing the wrong way. In *Medea* an angry mob bent on lynching Medea is at her door. In *Ion* Creusa can never escape the Delphian mob, and even if she should get safe back to Athens Ion would always hate and fear her. And in all these cases we are given grounds for doubting the miraculous solution. In *Ion* the freshness of the tokens allegedly exposed in Ion's infancy, particularly the verdant olive branch, is remarked upon. Medea's earlier appeal to King Aegeus of Athens for protection would make reasonable men doubt that she could command a chariot drawn by dragons. In *Iphigenia* it is doubtful whether Thoas would heed the Greek goddess, and as in the other plays the whole story has cast doubt on the benevolence of the gods.

It is not that Euripides means to ridicule the gods or even question their power. If they are measured by the norms of humanity, as the unenlightened in the audience would tend to measure them, they would indeed appear to be authors of evil. With other thinkers of the fifth-century enlightenment, Euripides conceived of gods and men as following disparate modes of behavior. What the gods do is beyond human control or even understanding; man must follow his own modes. The people in Euripides do and suffer as they do because they are the sort of people they are. If the palpably improbable endings of the plays are disregarded they would be not only more credible but more tragic and more meaningful. And if Euripides had been forced so to manipulate the action as to make the traditional or the happy ending its natural conclusion, he could not have made the human issues so clear-cut or the passions so violent.

It would appear, then, that Euripides is intentionally moving on two levels. It is no sop to conservatism when the gods out of the machine provide explanations (called "etiologies") for some traditional usage or institution. So much Euripides could accept; what he objects to is making the gods responsible for the motivations of men confronted by human crises. If you insist on the traditional or happy ending, he seems to be saying, here it is; but I shall make it as hard as I can for you to accept and I hope you will not. For a Medea to escape punishment is not truly a happy ending, however much we may condemn society for warping her character and making her violence inevitable.

6

If at his own conjuncture in the history of social and religious thought Euripides exploited the god out of the machine so effectively, his doing so made it impossible for any successor to use the device except as a piece of archaism or a jest. And so with the chorus, and so particularly with the dramatis personae inherited from the heroic age. No serious artist could again cultivate the old form, and the pensioners of the Ptolemies who attempted it found no audiences. What they and their successors produced were nothing more than imitations, to be exhibited like specimens in a museum of antiquities.

But the essential Euripides did have a progeny. Freed from the constraints of the heroic names with their massive and rigid associations, playwrights could create frankly contemporary characters and consequently invent plots to illustrate their interaction. So far New Comedy is the heir of Old, for Old Comedy too (represented by Aristophanes) was free to invent character and plot. But in its serious objective of examining the problems and motivations of ordinary humanity, New Comedy, and all of European drama which derived from it, descends not from Aristophanes' farces but from the drama of Euripides.

Euripides' central innovation, which is reducing the heroic to the contemporary, brings in its train other innovations which

connect him with New Comedy and modern drama. There is, for example, a new concern with sexual passion, which the older poets did not consider a sufficient motivation for tragedy. There is a new concern with intrigue and suspense, surprise encounters and recognitions, and these elements must have verisimilitude according to contemporary standards. Most of all, there is concern for psychological understanding.

The images of the tragic personages which are accepted as symbols in European literature were fixed by Euripides. This is true not only of a Medea or Hippolytus, who do not appear in the surviving work of Euripides' predecessors, but even and especially of Electra and Orestes, who do. It is through Euripides' lenses that we see these figures even in Aeschylus and Sophocles. And even for these, Euripides' lenses may well be right; the point is that he was concerned with accurate psychological perception. His predecessors were not. Their personages tend to be types, almost mathematical symbols, to illustrate the operation of some universal principle, and the spectator sees them only frontally, at the point of conflict. Euripides shows us his characters in the round. We learn enough of their general attitudes and antecedents to see why they behave as they do, and they are firmly enough established as real persons for us to surmise how they might act in other encounters.

When psychological analysis is in question it is to be expected that a dramatist would show special interest in abnormal personalities; and here Euripides' delineations are true and illuminating. Often he provides a gauge for deviation by means of a foil who is normal—a nurse or a Pylades no longer mute. But it is in his treatment of abused and thwarted women that Euripides shows his keenest insights. It was his understanding of women, paradoxically, that gave him the reputation of being a misogynist.

7

For the modern reader whose access to Euripides must be through translations it is more natural, as it may be more prof-

itable, to regard him as a pamphleteer rather than a poet. But he was a great poet and should be read as such; to present a poet in prose is to offer an inanimate instead of a pulsing organism. There are indeed fine verse translations of Euripides, but their merit depends on the individual poetic endowments of their translators, and a good translator does not and should not efface his own masterful personality. Verse translations therefore tend to be either grotesque or, if they are good poems, independent of Euripides. To study them may be illuminating, but it is not the study of a great poet working in a highly conventionalized and essentially alien tradition. To study poetic techniques, obviously, we must have before us the poet's own words.

But the substance of what he says we can apprehend in our own idiom. In the realm of human relationships, ideas, aspirations, the mature modern reader stands on the same ground as the ancient and is therefore competent to admire or deplore, to accept or reject, and most of all to have his own experience and perceptions enriched. To receive the enrichment which Euripides (not his interpreters) can offer, the glass through which we must look at him should be level and colorless—with no amber or purple tints of its own. Accordingly the present translators have aimed to make their version accurate and unadorned. Lyric passages, where language and imagery are more ornate, have been indicated as such by the use of italic type. Passages printed in italics are either choral odes or occasionally monodies to express some intense emotion; ordinary type represents the ordinary iambic meters used for the "spoken" portions. Within the choral passages, a long dash at the beginning of a line indicates a change of speaker. Square brackets indicate that competent editors have regarded the passage they enclose as an interpolation. Proper names supplied by the translators where the text refers to a personage by allusion are usually enclosed in parentheses.